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*Women of Long Island:
Cornelia Bryce Pinchot, Feminist, Social-Activist –
The Long Islander
Who Became First Lady of Pennsylvania*

by Judith Ader Spinzia

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"I believe one of the great contributions women can and will make to our political life is to help restore these necessary contacts between the politicians and the citizens. . . . Women are going to be on the job politically; they are going to function continuously, not only for a few weeks before election but day in and day out, year after year, in good times and in bad. And this is a new thing in politics. I remember the astonishment in Philadelphia at the state committee headquarters when we said we wanted money to carry on the work of the committee between elections. The old type of politicians could not understand it; they genuinely could not imagine what was to be done between elections nor see why headquarters should not be closed in the interregnum as it had always been." Cornelia Bryce Pinchot, 1922¹



*Bryce House, built by Lloyd Stephens Bryce,
now, Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts*

If you have ever visited the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor, New York, you are aware of the privileged life that a child growing up there would have experienced. *Bryce House*, as the Georgian Revival house was originally known, was designed by Ogden Codman, Jr. for Lloyd Stephens Bryce.² The Bryces were socially prominent and appear on Ward McAllister's list of "Four Hundred." Lloyd Bryce, who owned controlling interest in the *North American Review* and was himself a writer, served as New York State Postmaster General, as a member of Congress, as Minister to The Netherlands and Luxembourg, and as a political advisor to Theodore Roosevelt. Mrs. Bryce, the former Edith Cooper, was the daughter of New York City's Mayor Edward Cooper and granddaughter of Peter Cooper, the New York City industrialist, inventor, alderman, and presidential candidate.³

The Bryces' daughter, Cornelia Elizabeth Bryce, who was to become a suffragist, a politician, and the social-activist wife of conservationist and politician Gifford Pinchot, was born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1881. Not the conventional young socialite, she was unwilling to enter the whirl of society as a debutant, much to the disappointment of her conventional parents. She is quoted as saying, "I was hopelessly maladjusted to the butterfly existence my parents wanted for me," reveling instead in almost any activity that took her out-of-doors such as competitive sports, riding-to-hounds at a Long Island drag hound club, or driving four-in-hand.⁴ Educated on Long Island, Cornelia lived with her parents and two siblings at *Bryce House* until her marriage to Pinchot in August 1914. In fact, they were married in a quiet ceremony at *Bryce House*, foregoing the large society nuptials that had been planned for that fall due to the serious illness of Gifford's mother Mary. The rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, Roslyn, The Reverend Clifton H. Brewer, performed the ceremony. A small gathering of friends and family, including the Theodore Roosevelts and the James R. Garfields, attended the wedding after which the Pinchots sailed across the Sound to the side of his ailing mother.⁵ Mary Jane Eno Pinchot died in Connecticut just ten days after the marriage. Gifford, who was then in the midst of his first political campaign, returned to Pennsylvania with his new bride where they made *Grey Towers*, the Pinchot family estate in Milford, Pennsylvania, their primary home.⁶ Thus began a life of public service together that was to last until Gifford's



*Pinchot family home, Grey Towers,
Milford, Pennsylvania*

death in 1946. Cornelia launched into the first campaign of their partnership enthusiastically, giving as many as nine speeches a day.⁷ Gifford lost his bid as the Progressive Party candidate for the Senate, unable to challenge the strong Republican “machine,” but they forged ahead and made Pennsylvania their political base for the next thirty-two years.

The activist career of Cornelia Bryce Pinchot is remarkably similar to that of First Lady (Anna) Eleanor (Roosevelt) Roosevelt, two years her junior, who also spent her early years on Long Island. Eleanor’s political acumen and activism would be compared to that of Cornelia Bryce Pinchot as she worked for the political career of Franklin Delano Roosevelt some years later.



Cornelia, and Gifford Pinchot; their son Gifford Bryce Pinchot and friend on horse

These two Long Island ladies indeed knew each other and attended dancing school together as children.⁸ Unlike Eleanor, however, Cornelia was competitive and independent. She also had been active in politics long before she met and married Gifford Pinchot. First and foremost she was a suffragist, a dedication of purpose she carried from her teenage years on Long Island to her fight to insure final ratification of the nineteenth amendment by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Cornelia, at a young age, became a member of the New York State Progressive Service.⁹ Attracted by the project begun by her maternal grandfather, Cornelia also became active in the work of Cooper Union in the institute’s programs created to increase opportunities for women. She and her mother were members of the Advisory Council of the Woman’s Art School, School of Stenography and Typewriting, and School of Telegraphy at Cooper Union.¹⁰ As a member of the board of managers of Bellevue Hospital in New York City Cornelia managed the Nurses’ Home and ran the social service department. She served on the Women’s Committee to Establish Working Rooms for Women in a study of employment in New York City and as the fire inspector for the New York City Committee of Safety after the tragedy of New York City’s Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in 1911.¹¹

Of concern to a number of socially active Nassau County women, among them Cornelia, was the lack of accessible nursing care on Long Island due to the scattered population patterns. In 1913 a plan for district nursing, such as was being practiced in cities throughout the Northeast, was proposed. Roslyn responded, becoming one of the first villages on Long Island to undertake such a service to the

local community. A staffed nursing office was set up in the parish house of Trinity Episcopal Church on Northern Boulevard in Roslyn. The organization, of which Cornelia was a charter member, provided for the twenty-four-hour availability of a nurse who could work closely on a case with local physicians and through which city physicians could maintain patient care after their patients returned to the Island.¹²

Involved as part of Theodore Roosevelt's political circle and a participant in the intimate discussions that took place at Theodore Roosevelt's Cove Neck estate *Sagamore Hill*, Cornelia took more and more interest in politics as a pathway for social reform through protective labor legislation. She became involved in her first national political campaign in 1912 when she campaigned for Roosevelt in his attempt to regain the White House as a candidate of the Bull Moose Party. It was during that campaign that she met Gifford Pinchot, who was an advisor to Theodore Roosevelt and served as President Roosevelt's Chief Forester, the first person so named in the nation's history.¹³ Cornelia maintained a correspondence with President Roosevelt throughout the remainder of his life. Gifford wrote that "Theodore Roosevelt had said that she [Cornelia] knew more about politics than any other woman among his friends."¹⁴



Cornelia Bryce Pinchot gardening at Grey Towers

Gifford, as a Progressive, was also strongly in favor of suffrage for women, declaring women "more realistic, more receptive to facts, and more receptive to new ideas."¹⁵ Cornelia reiterated her continued stand on women's rights in a speech in Kittanning, Pennsylvania, on January 8, 1925, when she said, "I have fought many times before I ever met Mr. Pinchot for the things he represents so that I was already committed as it was, and even if he'd not been my husband, I'd have been for him, in common with most of the women of the state, I may say."¹⁶

A tall, elegant woman, five-feet, ten-inches, with flaming red hair and a preference for red clothes, in shades that complimented her hair color, Cornelia Bryce Pinchot presented a dramatic figure. She drove a red car and eschewed the socially dictated blue or black ink for correspondence, instead filling her

fountain pen with green ink. Anytime Cornelia sat down to talk, or rest, or listen to music, she reached for her knitting. Kitting needles, wool, and a “garment-in-progress” traveled with her to every meeting, every speech.¹⁷ In Elizabeth Frazer’s 1922 profile of Cornelia she states, “There is in fact nothing formal, remote or even remotely stained glass or cathedral about her, unless it be the gorgeous cathedral glory of her red hair.”¹⁸

Cornelia felt that the increasing complexity and pace of twentieth century American life busied the electorate. They elected politicians to keep the government running and only “checked up on them” when election time rolled around. She believed that the electorate’s indifference was what gave politicians power. Independently of her husband’s political life she had become secretary of the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association in 1918 and lobbied for ratification of the nineteenth amendment. Deciding that their fortunes lay with the Republican Party, Cornelia became active in Pennsylvania’s Republican Party, serving as the first woman representative to the party’s committee from the Pinchots’ home district in Monroe County. After serving as treasurer of the Pennsylvania Republican Women’s Committee and realizing that it was impotent in terms of its influence upon policy, she organized the Pennsylvania Council of Republican Women.¹⁹

The Pinchots became widely known and appreciated across the Commonwealth through their consistent social activism. Again, Gifford ran for office but this time for the office of Governor of Pennsylvania and this time as a Republican. Pinchot challenged the strong Pennsylvania Republican “machine” in a primary that the former Progressive, not the choice of the “machine,” was supposed to lose. He did not lose; they did not lose. With Gifford’s election to the governorship in 1922, Cornelia, whom he repeatedly credited for delivering the women’s vote, hit the ground running, always with knitting in hand, and worked ceaselessly for the legal and economic rights of women in the home and in the workplace. She worked in opposition to the attempt to repeal Pennsylvania’s direct primary, which she maintained gave women a role in selecting party candidates. In Gifford’s second term as governor Cornelia turned her attention to the plight of women and children in the labor force, working



*First Lady Cornelia Bryce Pinchot
with the Sweat Shop Strikers, 1933*

hard for minimum wage laws and encouraging women to unionize. Cornelia spoke out and in so doing brought women onto the school boards that controlled the education of their children, into the workplace to contribute their time and energy to the community and the nation, into the polls to

exercise their newly-won franchise, and into the unions to help institute change, but she also brought the wrath of the Roman Catholic Church down upon herself when she advocated birth control so all women, as she voiced it, could have the freedom to experience life as do men. In a speech delivered in Philadelphia in 1924, she quipped, “For thousands of years, the world has belonged to the men. They’ve had all the fun, all the excitement, all the real romance.”²⁰ Her devotion to women’s rights and social feminism was never compromised. When the 1938 Equal Rights Amendment was proposed, she stood in strong opposition to it because she viewed the amendment’s wording as a threat to the labor reforms already won by women. What she determined was necessary was legislation that would protect women in the workplace.²¹



The State Capitol Building, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, around which the activist First Lady led marches for the causes she championed while the governor, her husband, sat inside in his office

Ambitious for her husband’s political future, Cornelia became convinced his career could best be served through her social activism and her entry into politics. She ran for the United States House of Representatives in 1928 and in 1932, albeit unsuccessfully.²² In 1934, as an independent, Cornelia tried to succeed Gifford as Governor of Pennsylvania. Support lacking, she withdrew from the race.²³

Near the end of his second term as governor in 1935, Gifford became incapacitated for several months with an extreme case of shingles. While he was in a New York hospital being treated, Cornelia, according to Gifford, ran the Commonwealth.²⁴ He had asserted in a speech to the Manufacturers’ Club in Philadelphia on December 9, 1922, that the concern of the GOP leadership in reference to his initial candidacy had been Cornelia’s “proved political generalship.” Her capability could definitely be described as an asset not a liability during the months of his illness.

The Depression had severely impacted Gifford's personal financial situation. Fortunately, the Pinchots had agreed not to merge their finances and it is believed that their expenses, both personal and political, were financed by Cornelia's fortune. In 1938 Gifford again had to draw on Cornelia's money in his unsuccessful attempt to return to elected office.²⁵

With Gifford's death from leukemia in 1946, Cornelia left Pennsylvania to live full time in Washington, DC.²⁶ Her activism in this post-World War II era was directed toward the need for international disarmament. Until her death in 1960 Cornelia Bryce Pinchot continued to voice her wise opinions for human responsibility and social change, supported as always by practical details and no-nonsense declarations.

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ENDNOTES

1. Frazer, Elizabeth, "Mrs. Gifford Pinchot, Housewife and Politician." *The Saturday Evening Post* August 26, 1922, np.

2. See Raymond E. and Judith A. Spinzia, *Long Island's Prominent North Shore Families: Their Estates and Their Country Homes*, vol. I (College Station, TX: VirtualBookworm, 2006) – Bryce entry.

3. In 1840, while an alderman in New York City, Peter Cooper founded Cooper Union as a free institute in the style of the *École Polytechnique* in Paris. He erected a building and endowed the school. In 1858 he added to his gift by founding the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. In 1876 Cooper sought the White House as a candidate of the Greenback Party ticket. At eighty-five, he is the oldest person ever to have been nominated for the presidency by any political party. He came in third to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democratic Party candidate Samuel J. Tilden. Cooper is also credited with building the famous "Tom Thumb" steam locomotive in 1830. Wikipedia.org.

4. Bocher, Rita B. "Glamorous, Progressive & Dry. Cornelia Bryce Pinchot Served as Pennsylvania's First Lady in the 1920s and '30s." *Pennsylvania* January/February, 2007, p. 43.

5. *The New York Times* August 16, 1914, p. 15.

James Rudolph Garfield, the third of the seven children of President James Abram Garfield and First Lady Lucretia Rudolph Garfield, served as the twenty-third United States Secretary of the Interior under President Theodore Roosevelt. James, age fifteen, his brother Harry, and Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of President Abraham Lincoln and First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, were with President Garfield at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad station in Washington when the president was assassinated in 1881. James, too, was an advisor to President Theodore Roosevelt and, as were Cornelia Bryce and Gifford Pinchot, involved in Roosevelt's bid for a third term.

6. According to Martin Nelson McCreary, the Gifford Pinchots' Washington, DC, home was at 1615 Rhode Island Avenue. McGeary, Martin Nelson. *Gifford Pinchot: Forester Politician* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 249.
7. Bocher, p. 43.
8. McGeary, p. 394.
Spinzia, Raymond E. "Elliott Roosevelt, Sr. – A Spiral Into Darkness: The Influences." *The Freeholder*, Fall 2007, pp. 3-7, 15-17. For information on Elliot Roosevelt, Sr.'s Salisbury residence *Half Way Nirvana*, see Raymond E. and Judith A. Spinzia, *Long Island's Prominent Families in the Town of Hempstead: Their Estates and Their Country Homes* (College Station, TX: VirtualBookworm, 2010) – Roosevelt entry.
Eleanor Roosevelt was a guest of the Pinchots at the governor's mansion in Harrisburg in February 1933, just prior to FDR's inauguration. A now-famous Depression dinner was served to the forty-eight guests, including Mrs. Roosevelt. The food was purchased from a food pantry for the unemployed. The menu included black bean soup, cornbread, cabbage rolls stuffed with salmon and rice, hamburger steaks, salad, and ice cream. Accustomed to political criticism, Eleanor and Cornelia were non-pulsed by suggestions that the 5 1/2-cent-per-person meal was a publicity gimmick in seriously bad taste. *The New York Times* September 10, 1960, p. 21, and John A. Garroty, ed. *Dictionary of American Biography, Supplement Six, 1956-1960* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), pp. 509-10.
9. "Roosevelt Talks Politics to Women." *The New York Times* July 16, 1914, p. 3.
10. Cooper Union, 49th Annual Report, June 4, 1908.
11. Severance, Carol. "Cornelia Bryce Pinchot (1881-1960)." Publication of Grey Towers National Historic Landmark, Milford, PA.
12. "Roslyn Tries Plan of District Nursing." *The New York Times* June 30, 1913, p. 7.
13. Grey Towers National Historic Site, online historical information.
Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt were revolutionary in their thinking about the forests and the need for forest management. The general consensus was that clearcutting forests was a perfectly acceptable way to use the resource. It was still not understood to be an exhaustible resource that must be conserved despite the clear lessons of Europe's loss of forests during the Middle Ages. Those who ignored conservation and reforestation arguments included Gifford's father James who saw nothing wrong with the shameful decimation of forests which occurred not once but twice in the history of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.
14. McCreary, p. 250.
15. Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 763, Library of Congress, and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Legislative Journal, 129th Session of the General Assembly (January 7, 1931). XII. 10.
16. Cornelia Bryce Pinchot Papers, box 449, Library of Congress.
17. Bocher, p. 43.

18. Frazer, np.

19. Cornelia resigned from the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Council of Republican Women she had organized, stating that the board did not represent the politics of the council as a whole. She determined that most members could be described as “independent” and that the board had been packed with, in her words, “organization members.” *The New York Times* November 19, 1931, p. 9.

20. May 10, 1924, Cornelia Bryce Pinchot Papers, box 449, Library of Congress.

21. Bocher, p. 45.

22. Cornelia Bryce Pinchot Papers, “Cornelia Bryce Pinchot: A Register of Her Papers in the Library of Congress,” biographical note, 2005.

Bocher’s reference, p. 45, to Cornelia’s third run for Congress can not be documented; she may have been referencing Cornelia’s brief consideration of a possible run for the governorship in 1934.

23. *The New York Times* September 10, 1960, p. 21.

24. Governor Gifford Pinchot told Miss C. E. Carr that it was Cornelia “who was running the State of Pennsylvania when I was laid up.” December 18, 1936.

25. McCreary, p. 277.

Gifford served as Governor of Pennsylvania from 1923 to 1927 and from 1931 to 1935. When he decided to make another run for elected office in 1938, his coffers were again empty. Cornelia also financed the unsuccessful run for the United States Senate in 1938. McCreary, p. 417.

26. *Grey Towers* was inherited by the Pinchots’ only child, their son Dr. Gifford Bryce Pinchot, who donated it to the U.S.D.A. Forest Service in 1963. It is now open to the public as a National Historic Site. Designed by Richard Morris Hunt in 1886 for Gifford Pinchot’s father James Pinchot, in Milford, Pennsylvania, it is nestled in the Pocono Mountains and overlooks the Delaware River. The reforestation around *Grey Towers* is the work of Gifford Pinchot.



*library at Grey Towers
decorated by Cornelia Bryce Pinchot*

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